

# CONDUCTING VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

## COURSE INFORMATION

COURSE NUMBER:	Com 598
TIME:	Wed 6:00-8:45
PLACE:	Stauffer A13
PROFESSOR:	Eric Margolis
OFFICE HOURS:	Wednesday 2:00- 4:00, and by appointment
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## REQUIRED TEXTS

This is not really a syllabus in the traditional sense of a list of readings and discussion topics. The course will be a hands-on practicum in **doing** visual ethnography. In other words you will do all the work and we will not meet on a regular basis :-). The first few weeks we will meet as a seminar to get to know each other and to look at some projects made by previous students. Some of you have taken my Critical Visual Theory seminar or my Introduction to Qualitative Research Class; others I look forward to getting to know. After a couple of weeks, you or your team should post a brief, one page, description of your proposed project. On the Blackboard site, under "Discussions" I made a folder to post your proposals. Thereafter I will be available on-line, on skype, or in person by appointment to meet with teams or individuals to discuss projects.

The seminar always attracts an interesting and multi-talented interdisciplinary group of students. Your classmates come from Design, Communication, Education, Justice, Anthropology, Religious studies... Some of you have taken my Critical Visual Theory seminar and will be excellent resources on theory issues (find some of their notes and comments under "A place for student notes and comments" add your own under A place for 2013 Student Notes/Comments). Working alone or in small groups you will undertake and complete a project of your own design. Some have more expertise in theory, others in the technology end. There is only one text, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*. It is a classic and very helpful "how to" book. For every topic covered by Collier and Collier, there is also a wealth of readings available on the Blackboard site (BTW, The "required readings" folder is not for this class).

A word about the Blackboard site. This is intended as a resource for you. It is the product not only of my work, but of two decades of student input. I use it for both the critical theory class and this practicum. **As soon as possible I will upgrade everyone from student to course builder.** Thus you will have the ability to use the site in any way you choose. Upload material,

rearrange it, leave announcements, and use it to showcase your work. If working as a team you can use Blackboard to communicate – but there are many other ways as well.

In mid-semester we will meet as a seminar one or two times to view works in progress. Let's say October 2nd and 9<sup>th</sup>, just before fall break. We will meet at the end of the semester November 27<sup>th</sup> and December 4<sup>th</sup> to view and discuss final projects (the 4<sup>th</sup> is the last day of class, but depending on the number and length of projects we could also meet the 11<sup>th</sup> which is reading day.) FYI 10 students from the 2011 class presented at the IVSA meeting in Brooklyn and 4 presented last July at Goldsmiths College, London. (The only university to offer Ph.D's in Visual Anthropology and Visual Sociology.)

**A word about the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects.** The last time I taught this course everyone did the same kind of assignment – to make a 4 minute video on some topic related to education using still photos and voice over narration. I will show some examples. We all applied to the IRB and the project was judged to be “stories” and *did not fit the definition of research that produces generalizable results*. So the class was excused from the IRB. In general work done as a class project and not for any other purpose is exempt from applying for IRB approval. **HOWEVER**, if you intend your project to be part of a MA thesis or Ph.D. Dissertation you should absolutely apply to the IRB. Similarly if it involves under-age persons, or anyone at risk (sex, drugs, protected populations) you **must** apply. Even if you intend a conference presentation you should be covered. Your Chair will have to agree to be the PI (principal investigator). It is especially important for those of us doing visual research because we cannot guarantee anonymity or confidentiality. If you have questions please ask me.

The website for research on humans is:

<http://researchintegrity.asu.edu/humans>

The forms are at:

<http://researchintegrity.asu.edu/humans/forms>

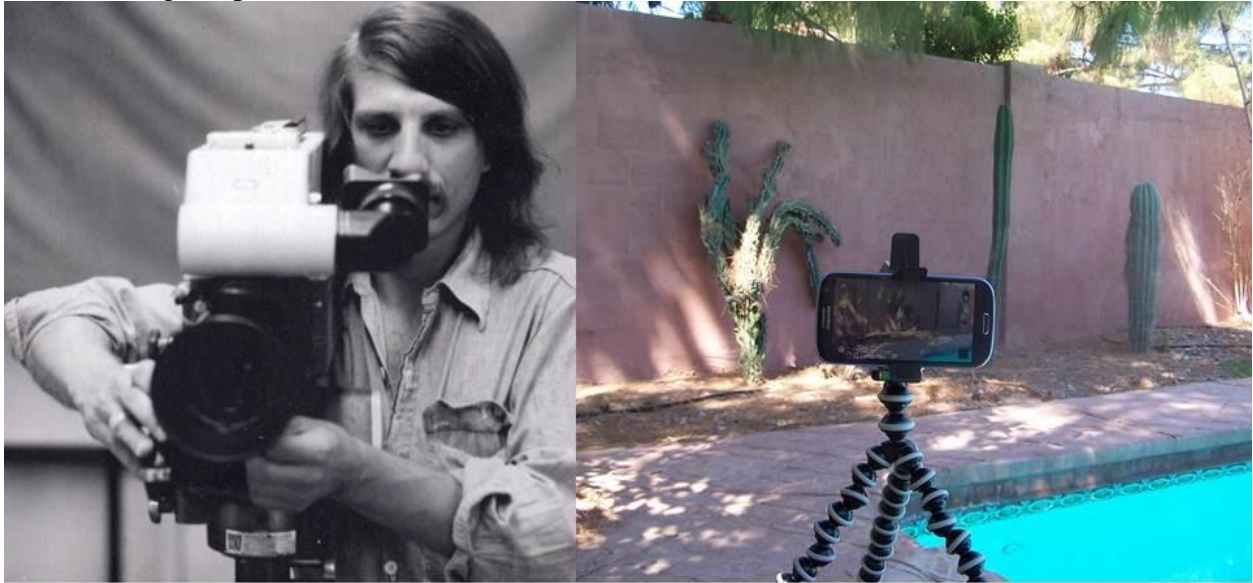
You will need to do an online course and take some quizzes at

<https://www.citiprogram.org/>

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## WHAT IS VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

There are three main techniques in visual ethnography: 1) the use of cameras to record elements of the social or material world, 2) the study of images produced as part of culture, 3) the production of images to communicate research findings. Any approach can be used for seminar projects. There are both positivist and interpretivist (quantitative and qualitative) methods in use in what Doug Harper termed “an artful science”.



Then

Now

**Using cameras as a research device** can include still or motion pictures made by the researcher. Film and video cameras are particularly well suited as data gathering technologies for experiments and small group interactions, classroom studies, participant observation, oral history, life history, etc. Researcher produced visual data can be used in large scale cultural ethnographies, or in the close work of micro-ethnography or ethnomethodology. It can include giving cameras to participants and having them do the recording in projects sometimes called photovoice. There is another technique of data gathering, photo elicitation. Photo elicitation techniques involve using photographs or film as part of an interview -- in essence asking research subjects to discuss the meaning of photographs, films or videos. In this case the images can be taken especially by the researcher with the idea of using them to elicit information, they

can belong to the subject, for example family photographs or movies, or they can be gathered from other sources including archives, newspaper and television morgues, or corporate collections. Typically the interviewee's comments or analysis of the visual material is itself recorded, either on audio tape or video, etc. One might also explore techniques like providing visual technology to our "subjects" to make their own documents is what has come to be known variously as photo-voice (picturevoice, paint voice), "shooting-back", photo novella, or visual autoethnography



**Visual ethnography studies visual images produced as part of culture.** Art, photographs, film, video, fonts, advertisements, computer icons, landscape, architecture, machines, fashion, makeup, hair style, facial expressions, tattoos, and so on are parts of the complex visual communication system produced by members of societies. For the past several years I have been working with historic photographs, first of coal mines, later of schools and schooling. Their use and understanding is governed by socially established symbolic codes. Visual images are constructed and may be deconstructed. They can be analysed with techniques developed in diverse fields of literary criticism, art theory and criticism, content analysis, semiotics, iconography/iconology, deconstructionism, or the more mundane tools of ethnography. We can count them. We can ask people about them. We can study their use and the social settings in which they are produced and consumed.

## Here is a brief lesson on Semiotics



Symbols can be concrete by resembling something in the “real world”. Concreteness helps the viewer interpret the icon correctly.



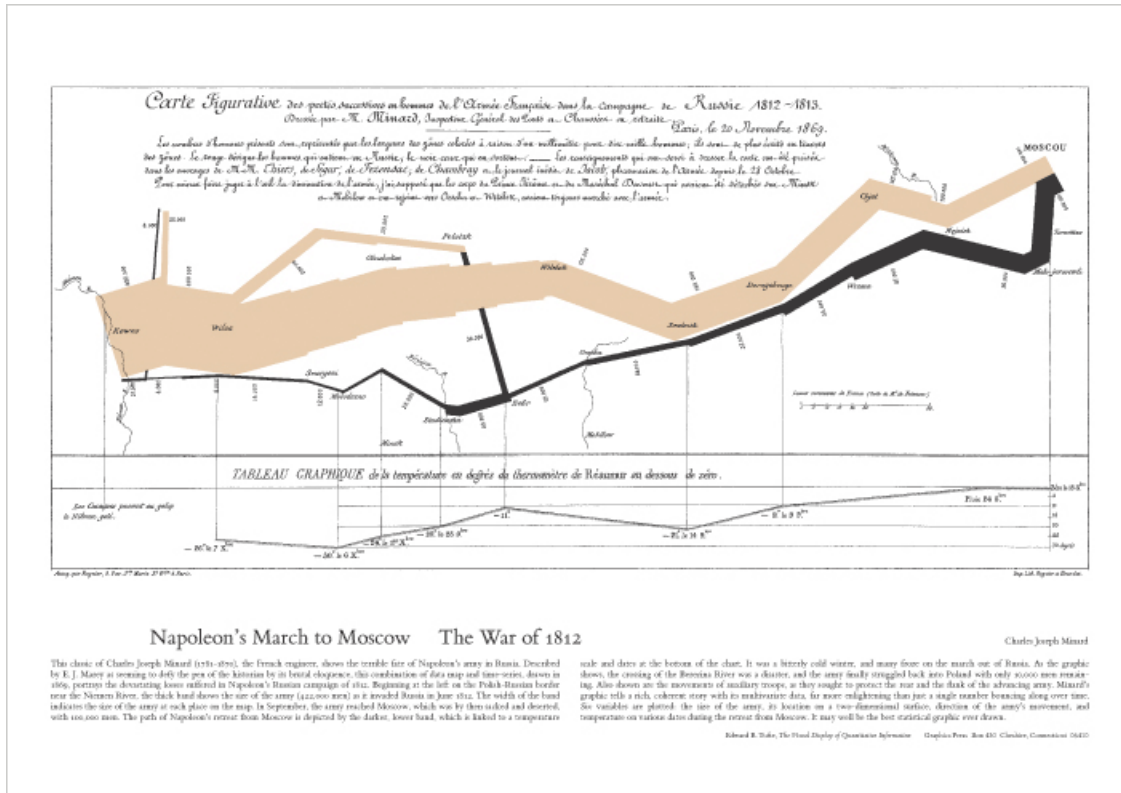
Complexity consists of richer detail as with the ubiquitous representation of family on car windows. Viewers fill in the details.



Icons have “semantic distance” when they represent functions as in the no-smoking signs. Viewers interpret and perform.



“Probably the best statistical graphic ever drawn, this map by Charles Joseph Minard portrays the losses suffered by Napoleon's army in the Russian campaign of 1812. Beginning at the Polish-Russian border, the thick band shows the size of the army at each position. The path of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow in the bitterly cold winter is depicted by the dark lower band, which is tied to temperature and time scales.” Edward Tufte



In the context of **visual communication of research findings**, visual ethnography should also mean studying the work of Edward Tufte, whose remarkable books: Envisioning Information and The Visual Display of Quantitative Information should be required "reading" for every educator -- especially the more post-positivist and quantitative among us.

<http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte/>

Similarly, we should consider the logics of presentation of sociological and anthropological documentarians and Ethnographers like Flaherty, Lorentz, Mead and Bateson, and Wiseman. Visual ethnography also requires the development of new forms -- cartoony things and data driven computer graphics to represent complex relationships e.g., changing social networks over time, the primitive accumulation of capital, the flow of labor, relations between theory and practice.

Some excellent examples of statistical graphics can be found in the *New York Times*. Check out:

*How Class Works*

[http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/20050515\\_CLASS\\_GRAPHIC/index\\_03.html?scp=3&sq=interactive%20graphics&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/20050515_CLASS_GRAPHIC/index_03.html?scp=3&sq=interactive%20graphics&st=cse)

*Murder in New York City*

<http://projects.nytimes.com/crime/homicides/map>

*How Different Groups Spend their day*

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/31/business/20080801-metrics-graphic.html?hp>

There are exciting new developments using geographic mapping systems (GIS) where not only numeric data is used but geographic locations are pinned to photographs, drawings, stories and so on. PGIS is participatory GIS and allows people – not just researchers -- to build information systems. See Dan Collins and the McKinnon article under required readings.

<http://www.coloradriverstories.org/>

